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Recent Research Efforts Aimed at Managing Blackbird Depredation on Rice in Texas

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Blackbirds, particularly the red-winged blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), are serious pests of sprouting and ripening rice in Texas. Severe seedling losses can force producers to reseed while damage to ripening ratoon rice (which normally matures in October and November when blackbirds form flocks augmented by northern migrants) can reduce the value of the crop below the cost of harvest. Estimates of blackbird damage to rice in Texas approach $5 million annually.

Several cultural methods are employed by rice producers to decrease losses caused by blackbirds: (1) increase seeding rate (2) plant early maturing varieties (3) delay planting (4) cover seed (5) remove loafing and roosting vegetation surrounding fields and (6) use a continuous or pinpoint flood. In addition, producers harass birds by shooting and using scare cannons.

Recent research on the sprouting crop has involved the field evaluation of potential repellents applied to the sprouting and ripening grain. In 1989 a nontoxic clay-based seed treatment reduced sprout loss roughly 20%. Average feeding rates were decreased from 8.4 (untreated seed) to 1.5 (clay-based seed treatment) seed consumed per minute. A copper containing fungicide, Kocide, applied to seed was also evaluated for repellency in commercial fields in 1990 and 1991. Results from 1990 showed that Kocide-treated plots suffered 15% damage compared with 27% in control plots. Sevin XLR Plus applied to the ripening ratoon crop at 1.5 lb AI/acre was evaluated for repellency in commercial field tests in 1989 and 1991.

Reducing blackbird depredation is difficult and must include an array of strategies and tactics which are minimally environmentally disruptive. Control methods which adversely affect non-target species or drastically alter blackbird habitat will not be permitted by governmental regulatory agencies.